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THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY

MICHELLE LOPEZ



EARTH RAISED UP HER HEAD
FROM THE DARKNESS DREAD AND DREAR,
HER LIGHT FLED,
STONY, DREAD,
AND HER LOCKS COVERED WITH GREY DESPAIR.

– FROM *EARTH'S ANSWER*, WILLIAM BLAKE (SONGS OF EXPERIENCE)

IF TRUE EXPERIENCE IS THE FALL FROM INNOCENCE AFTER EXPOSURE TO THE MATERIAL WORLD AND ALL OF ITS MORTAL SIN, HOW CAN ART PERFORM A HISTORICAL REVERSAL TO BRAVELY SAY THAT TRUE INNOCENCE DOES NOT COME BEFORE EXPERIENCE BUT *AFTER* IT, AND POSSIBLE ONLY BY BEARING THROUGH IT?

THE WORK OF MICHELLE LOPEZ EMERGES FROM THIS BURNING QUESTION AND TAKES EXPERIENCE AS ITS MEDIUM. EXPERIENCE HERE TAKES MANY FORMS – THE BONDING OF BRUTALITY AND GRACE, THE NATURAL AND THE SYNTHETIC – YET LOPEZ'S MOST POIGNANT MATERIAL BEING THE INTANGIBLE FORCE WITH WHICH SHE GUIDES HER WHOLE EXHIBITION AS IF GUIDING THE EYE OF THE STORM: THE ARTIST'S APPROPRIATION OF HER OWN HISTORICAL SITUATION. *THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY* DOCUMENTS LOPEZ'S MOVEMENT THROUGH THE SOCIOPOLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE ART WORLD AT LARGE, THE JAGGED FLIGHT OF HER OWN CAREER AND THE INTIMATELY PERSONAL AND MICROPOLITICAL CHOICES SHE HAS HAD TO NEGOTIATE AT EVERY TURN.

THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO MANAGE A DISASTER AND MULTIPLE MODES OF "DAMAGE CONTROL" (AS WE'VE LEARNED TO SAY WHEN APPLIED TO 'ISSUES' OF THE PSYCHE). WE'VE SEEN SOCIETIES LIKE OUR OWN BECOME DESTROYED BY A CONTROLLING, PATHOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP TO DISASTER, EITHER BY ITS COMPULSION TO RUSH IN AND SEAL THE SHATTERED SURFACE OF A COLLECTIVE FANTASY AND REPRESS **ALL THAT THREATENS TO INTERRUPT IT**, OR BY DECEPTIVELY POINTING TO THE EXISTENCE OF DISASTER WHERE IT DOES NOT EXIST, SIMPLY TO LEGITIMIZE THE UNACCEPTABLE, I.E. TORTURE. THE SCULPTURES IN *THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY* REJECT THESE ADVERSE PATHOLOGIES AND FORGE A PATH TOWARDS THE TRUTH OF THE ARTIST'S PRACTICE AND THE TRUTH OF THE ARTIST'S LIFE, DEFORMITIES IN TACT. LOPEZ'S INSTALLATION IS AT ONCE THE ACTUAL THRESHOLD OR LIMIT OF HER HISTORICAL PROGRESSION AS AN ARTIST, AS WELL AS THE PASSAGE TO A NONLINEAR PRACTICE OF TIME AND SPACE WHERE INNOCENCE – THROUGH EXPERIENCE – IS IN A MESSIANIC STATE OF RETURN.

IN IT'S SCARRED AND STARTLING PRESENCE, THE BODY OF WORK IN *THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY* HAS LESS TO DO WITH RISING FROM THE RUINS AND ASHES OF THE PAST THAN THE SIGNIFICANTLY MORE RADICAL MESSAGE AT THE CORE OF MICHELLE LOPEZ'S PROJECT – WHAT IT MEANS IN THE PRESENT *TO BE ON FIRE*. WITH THE SHEER VELOCITY OF AN IDEA AND A HEALTHY SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM, AN ARTIST CAN TAKE FLIGHT, AND WITH THE SAME SPEED AND INTENSITY SHE CAN ALSO CRASH, BUT *"ART IS THE ONLY THING THAT CAN GO ON MATTERING ONCE IT HAS STOPPED HURTING."*¹

– CARISSA RODRIGUEZ



AIRPLANE CRASH, SIBERIA 1997

¹ EXCERPT FROM 'HEAT OF THE DAY', 1949 BY ELIZABETH BOWEN

MICHELLE LOPEZ THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY

There has been an accident: a car is totaled, a tree is lodged in a wall, and a “body” is thrown to the floor. Appropriating Flannery O’Conner’s novel, Michelle Lopez’ recent exhibition, titled *The Violent Bear It Away*, presents three discrete objects, each relegated to a state of perpetual disability. In many respects, the exhibition serves as an artistic manifesto; truth is revealed through liminality and deciphered by trauma. In *The Violent Bear It Away*, Lopez guides the viewer through an autobiographical journey, transversing a minefield of personal histories, collective memories and art historical legacies. Lopez propels her sculpture through visual registers, rendering them vulnerable, changed and assuming a new identity. Continuing to scrutinize the possibilities of sculpture, Lopez is clear that the success of an object hinges on an understanding of materiality, space and subjectivity. In this regard, Lopez is a sculptor’s sculptor. Although seemingly effortless, there is nothing causal about Michelle Lopez’ practice; visual encounters occur through a methodical interplay of colliding identities. Flannery O’Conner’s novel elaborates on themes such as destiny, free will and the cyclical relationship between birth, death, and potentially rebirth. Lopez uses these theories as a point of departure to examine her own practice. The artist has made manifest a crucible: through the process of violence, destruction and regeneration, the visual signifiers associated with her as an artist are dismantled.

The setting of Flannery O’Conner’s *The Violent Bear It Away* is a farm called Powderhead, located in the backwoods of the South. Trees in the South, specifically the Sycamore tree, have been forced to bear witness to and provide the backdrop for countless lynchings. The Sycamore embodies the continued volatility of race and difference in America. In *Southern Trees / Black September*, a New York based Sycamore tree is thrust through a gallery wall, supported by industrial ropes, pulleys and sandbags. The tree feels quintessentially “New York”; it is a species whose patterned bark camouflages the urban landscape. This particular tree, felled under the supervision of the NYC Parks Department, was “re-rooted” only a block from its original location, now garnering a prosthetic branch. *Southern Trees / Black September* presents a pastoral cyborg whose new ghost-like limb, cast in an opaque white plastic, reaches towards the floor. This limb embodies absence, a reminder of what was lost in the process of upheaval.

Southern Trees / Black September emblemizes a day haunted by extreme religious divide; the artwork’s title references the violence experienced on September 6, 1970, the day of the Dawson Field hijacking, where a series of four New York City bound airplanes were commandeered in Jordan – a strategy later appropriated by the 9-11 hijackers. Black September also references the historic moment when 11 members of the Israeli wrestling team were held hostage and murdered by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Munich Olympics. This artwork is autobiographically inspired; Lopez, born on September 6, 1970, attempts to reconcile a complicated legacy. Here, one Sycamore tree serves as a representative for all Southern trees. Art historically, *Southern Trees / Black September* continues a conversation initiated by Zoe Leonard in which the artist documented trees restricted by fences, gates and other urban devices. In 1997, Leonard’s sculpture, *Tree*, debuted at the Paula Cooper Gallery, in which metal armatures, cables and hardware were employed to reconfigure a fragmented, broken whole.

In 2000, the Public Art Fund commissioned the first incarnation of *Woadsonner*. Situated at the MetroTech Center in Brooklyn, this artwork was perceived by Lopez as a failure. *Woadsonner* was a redux of her sculpture titled *Boy*, the original leather covered Honda that made its debut in 1999 as part of P.S.1 / MoMA’s Greater New York exhibition. *Woadsonner* seemed unnecessary – it was overworked, oddly gendered and artificial. It was exhibited on a display pedestal under essentializing lights that illuminated the “exotic” skin used to cover the car. In an effort to reconcile her artistic past, Lopez reconfigured *Woadsonner*, destroying and dismantling the sculpture. Lopez began by industrially crushing the car. The rear section was dislodged, the pristine beige leather skin was peeled and *Woadsonner’s* racecar chassis exposed after undergoing invasive sanding. *Woadsonner (edit)* is brutalized, and effectively redeemed.



PHOTOGRAPH OF DEAD BIRD,
TAKEN BY THE ARTIST, 2006

Woadsonner (edit) creates a profound binary to Charles Ray's seminal artwork *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997). Ray's *Unpainted Sculpture* articulates a crashed car, however there are major differences in both intention and practice. *Unpainted Sculpture* investigates the experiential overlap between the real and the abstract. The artwork is precise and calculated. After purchasing a demolished Pontiac Grand Am, Ray dismantled the car and cast each broken component in fiberglass. Ray then re-assembled the car, part by part, and painted the structure with a matte undercoat primer. The car visually disappears and the potential trauma is superseded by meticulous art making and Los Angeles' finish fetish car culture mentality. Ray's work is a mausoleum, an uncanny commemorative. Unlike Ray, Lopez is not concerned with product. Rather *Woadsonner (edit)* is perpetually in a state of trauma, gently slouching down the wall. It is non-commercial, unfinished, raw, and honest. *Woadsonner (edit)* simply exists. It's tanned, ribbed skin has been pulled back, revealing the car's crude metal components, plastic tubes and exposed wires. Lopez emblemizes a paradigm of art making that enables an encounter that is true rather than being predicated by its being "art." In fact, there is little conventional beauty in *Woadsonner (edit)*. There lies its power: it is the anthesis of over designed work or "design" in general. Here, the "edit" is the elimination of all adornment and the search for truth in one's own practice. Edit as renewal: a second chance, redefined, more specific, changed. What was formerly a failed, essentialized object is now, simply present.

O'Conner's *The Violent Bear It Away* discusses the notion of being "burned clean". The novel's main character, Francis Tarwater, after being sexually assaulted in the forest, ultimately burns down the surrounding Southern trees in an effort to cleanse the landscape. This principle serves as a point of departure for *Special Mission Project/Akira revisited*. Lopez' sculpture is a hyper stylized wig, a "body", whose form is reminiscent of Japanese anime toys. Cast is a mixture of soot (ash) and resin, Lopez's choice of material references a byproduct of *Southern Trees / Black September*, should the tree have been burned. The object is matte black and completely absorbs light. It appears frozen in space and time after having been ejected from the car, upon impact with the tree: wisps of hair are elevated in sharp, threatening points.

Special Mission Project/Akira revisited furthers Lopez' practice of manifesting subversive, sexualized forms, however now Lopez reveals her critique of Takashi Murakami's "Superflat" culture. In "Superflat", distinctions of High and Low are compressed in an airtight register. Unlike Murakami's drive towards the exotification and commodification of the female body, Lopez adopts an opaque, feminist approach. The wig serves as a self-portrait, complicating the male gaze of Murakami's Superflat legacy. If this "wig is to be read as an autobiography, Lopez has staged her own death. In many ways Murakami's artwork titled *Special Mission Project ko2* formally objectifies the female body: a cyborg woman pulls a ripcord on her back and, in a three-stage process, transforms into a plane. The subject's breasts and genitals are on full display, slowly expanding and taking center stage in the transformation. On the contrary, Lopez stares back, assuming an approach dictated by lack. The underside of the crashed wig reveals a labial form; a metaphorical black hole; a silhouette of absence and negation. Lopez puts forth the Anti-Special Mission Project ko2 or rather its counter. Here, Lopez presents a hybrid sculpture that compresses science fiction with altered realities: the viewer is presented an alternate manifestation of Akira, a Neo-Neo-Tokyo in the next chapter of the Superflat era.

The Violent Bear It Away includes three objects that fall victim to and are brutalized by regulated space. Lopez reinstates a new position for contemporary sculpture. The work articulates a cogent, anti-establishment platform that both challenges and succumbs to the principles of institutional hierarchy. For Lopez, the sculptural body remembers trauma in a complex, sensorial understanding of (re)memory. Concentrating on the aesthetics of ruin, entropy and transformation, Lopez puts forth objects centered around destruction and redemption; viewers are left to reflect upon Matthew 11:12 "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away."

– J.Uslip



KEN GONZALES-DAY, RUN UP, SEARCHING FOR CALIFORNIA'S HANG TREES, 2002



HONDA 600, 1971,
SAME CAR MODEL USED FOR BOY, 1999

MICHELLE LOPEZ

BORN 1970
LIVES AND WORKS IN BROOKLYN, NY

EDUCATION

- 1994 MFA, PAINTING AND SCULPTURE, SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS,
NEW YORK, NY
- 1992 BA CUM LAUDE, LITERATURE AND ART HISTORY, BARNARD COLLEGE,
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK, NY

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2009 SIMON PRESTON GALLERY, THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY,
NEW YORK, NY
- 2008 LA><ART, THE YEAR WE MADE CONTACT, LOS ANGELES, CA
- 2001 DEITCH PROJECTS, ADVENTURES IN THE SKIN TRADE,
NEW YORK, NY
- FONDAZIONE NICOLA TRUSSARDI, ADVENTURES IN THE SKIN
TRADE, MILAN, ITALY
- 1998 DEITCH PROJECTS, LEATHER, NEW YORK, NY
- 1996 FEATURE, INC., MICHELLE LOPEZ, NEW YORK, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 FAT HEAD BALLOON SELF PORTRAIT/ EXERCISING FOR EXCORCISING/
MY LIGHTS/C3PO, SIMON PRESTON GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY
- COUP DE GRACE, SIMON PRESTON GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY
- NINA IN POSITION, ARTIST SPACE, CURATED BY JEFFREY USLIP,
NEW YORK, NY
- 2005 BAY AREA NOW 4, YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS,
SAN FRANCISCO, CA
- 2004 OCMA, CALIFORNIA BIENNIAL, ORANGE COUNTY, CA
- 2000 GREATER NEW YORK, P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER,
LONG ISLAND CITY, NY
- HALCYON DAYS, PUBLIC ART FUND, METROTECH CENTER,
BROOKLYN, NY

CURATORIAL PROJECTS

- 2007 EXIT MUSIC (FOR A FILM), GRIMM/ROSENFELD, NEW YORK, NY
AND MUNICH, GERMANY

TEACHING

SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS, GRADUATE PROGRAM OF PAINTING AND
SCULPTURE, RESIDENT FACULTY, NEW YORK, NEW YORK, FALL 2005–PRESENT

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY, DEPARTMENT OF ART PRACTICE,
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, FALL 2002–2005



TAKASHI MURAKAMI,
SPECIAL MISSION PROJECT KO2,
(DETAIL), 1997

CATALOGUE DESIGN
THACKWAYMCCORD

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